

CANADIAN FIRST WORLD WAR INTERNMENT RECOGNITION FUND

Grant opportunities for scholars, writers and artists



Draga Dragasevic

VCS: What is the Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund and what is its purpose?

DD: The Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund is an endowment fund created by the Federal Government after negotiations with the Ukrainian Canadian community which, during two decades of primary research on this subject, identified a serious gap in our knowledge of this episode in Canadian history. In fact, the roots of this Fund date back 95 years to painful events which occurred in Canada. The Fund, announced in May 2008 by the office of Minister Jason Kenney, is a \$10 million endowment to the Ukrainian Taras Shevchenko organization in Winnipeg to oversee the granting of this money to support scholarly, commemorative and creative projects related to the internment.

A Fund Advisory Council was selected to work with the Shevchenko organization. The current composition of the Advisory Council includes five members of the Ukrainian community plus one representative from the Hungarian, Croatian, and Serbian communities respectively. Throughout the duration of this project the three non-Ukrainian members will be replaced by representatives of other ethnic groups affected by the internment. In this way, the Canadian government is encouraging input from all affected ethnic groups. This is one step toward recognition and reconciliation.

VCS: What was the internment all about and what was the reason for it?

DD: Canada supported the Kingdom of Serbia in World War I and sent medical and other delegations to assist that war ravaged country, but it was at war with the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Thousands of Canadian soldiers gave their lives in that war for the values we cherish in this country.

Out of fear, caution, xenophobia or whatever reason Canadian authorities instituted the War Measures Act for the first time in Canadian history. This law deprives citizens of their civil rights in times of crisis and gives authorities the right to detain whomever they wish. This law was put into effect again during World War II targeting Japanese in Canada and again in 1970 during the FLQ crisis.

Immigrants who were born within the boundaries of the vast Austro-Hungarian carried passports from there. Assuming that they were not loyal, Canada labelled them as 'enemy aliens'. Beginning in 1914 more than 80,000 were ascribed that label and obligated to report regularly to the Mounted Police. But up to 9,000 were rounded up and sent to 24 various internment camps across the country. Of those interned, most were of Ukrainian heritage and the others were a mixture of peo-

Editor's Note: The Globe & Mail (September 12, 2009) published an article about Canada's labour camps established from 1914 to 1920 for Europeans from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Among those interned during World War I were some of our early Serbian immigrants from the western regions of former Yugoslavia. A further announcement in that issue of the Globe pertaining to the Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund invited readers to apply for grants pertaining to this relatively unknown episode in Canadian history. The Voice of Canadian Serbs spoke with **Draga Dragasevic**, who represents the Serbian National Shield Society of Canada on the Advisory Council, about this important project.

ple of various ethnic backgrounds born in Austro-Hungary. These people were stripped of what little they had - their money, property, jobs - and forced to do heavy labour in isolated camps for the duration of the war and beyond. Although the vast majority of internees were men, two camps also contained women and children. Life was hard, the environment harsh, disease was rampant. Some tried to escape, but there was no escape.

VCS: What did this mean for our early Serbian immigrants?

DD: Our early Serbian settlers were mainly from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Lika, Kordun, Slavonija, regions currently known as Krajina. In other words, they carried Austro-Hungarian passports and were considered 'enemy aliens' under the policies of the time. It is ironic that these Serbs left the Empire because they opposed its rule over them and sought a better life in Canada. Their dreams were quickly shattered when the war started.

Although exact figures do not exist, we estimate that there may have been about 400 or so Serbs in the regions of Ontario. Of these approximately 300 were interned. They were picked up from the street or their place of residence and sent north to the Kapuskasing camp where they remained until 1919, one year after the Armistice was signed.

VCS: What was the role of the Serbian National Shield Society in assisting these Serbs?

DD: The Serbian National Shield Society was originally established in 1916 and is the oldest Serbian organization in this country. Serbs in the Toronto area who had membership cards were not rounded up. Their membership demonstrated that they were not enemies of Canada. About 300 in other regions of Ontario and Quebec who were without memberships were less fortunate. They were rounded up to endure very harsh conditions in the frozen north. Some Serbs had also settled out west to work in the forests, mines and farms, and it is possible that they were interned out there too.

In 1919, the year after the Armistice, many were still interned. In fact, the last camp with Ukrainians was closed in 1920.

Consul Ante Seferovic of the newly created Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, on the recommendation of scientist and Hon. Consul Mihajlo Pupin, asked Bozidar Markovic then President of the Serbian National Shield Society of Canada, to travel north to the camp to identify the Serbs and request their release. The Serbs were identified as Allies and not 'enemy aliens'. Thanks to the records kept by Mr. Markovic, a long time leader of the Serbian community who wrote about this in the Voice of Canadian Serbs and whose daughter Olga has revived the memory of this event, we can move forward to reclaim this lost history of our early Serbian immigrants.

Naturally, the liberated internees were distraught, broken in health, angry and bitter about their fate and this injustice. We believe they returned to their homeland.

VCS: How is this project meaningful in terms of Canada's evolution as a country of immigrants?

DD: The Ukrainian community, especially Professors Lubomyr Luciuk and Bohdan Kordan, deserve a lot of credit for 20 years of research which unearthed this story. With the endowment fund there is now an opportunity to complete this picture with more details. Much time has passed since these events occurred and descendants do not exist. On the initiative of the Ukrainian Canadian community, it was decided that restitution in the form

of a grant would facilitate ongoing commemoration and research to inform and educate the Canadian public as a reminder of this wrong and a memorial to those who had suffered.

There are many challenges as much of the archival material has been destroyed. In addition, immigrants were registered as Austro-Hungarians, so their actual ethnic origin is not always easily identifiable.

Canada's values during that period were not consistent with the values we hold now. Today we welcome people from areas in turmoil, offer them settlement support and heritage language retention. The poor immigrants of World War I received a very different reception. In view of our Canadian policies of multiculturalism and immigration, we have come a long way since 1914.

I encourage readers to check out the web site for additional information. Students of history, political science, immigration and human rights as well as writers and artists may want to consider applying.